rice grains & golden frames

poems

Kathleen Charles

Rice Grains & Golden Frames

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for…myself
and any other soul who happens to need it.

for…this dying world
and the love that i hope will be born from it's ashes.

for…everybody black
and the spirits in my skin.

I want to remind us all that art is dangerous...You have to know it before you start, and do it under those circumstances...because it is one of the most important things that humans do...

- Toni Morrison

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Foreword

When I first saw Kat perform "a plea from haiti's adbaraya toya" live, I was moved to tears. And not one beautiful tear rolling delicately down my own cheek either. They were big and messy streams accompanied by guttural sobs. But, when the performance was complete – I wiped my face (with my makeup almost completely intact I might add, perhaps another testament to the magic of Kat's words) and felt so much better. Lighter somehow. More seen.

I think that any great poet can have their work feel honest and personal but somehow also universal. Kat's work is so authentically their own. It is an unapologetic magnum opus of memories and reflections. This is evident in everything: from the dedication, to the quotes intricately woven through the book, to the thematic sections. And yet, as I flipped through its digital pages I felt as if I were being held by their words.

I felt them wash over me like something familiar and warm. I read poems that reflected inklings of a feeling that I had not known I had. I read poems that felt like home, in all the complexity and multiplicity of the word. I read phrases that made me smile so wide that I had to read them again and again. And of course there is something unique in reading the poetry of another queer, black, Caribbean femme person.

Seeing the way they have woven these identity and experiences into something so beautiful and grand – it makes my heart swell in a special sort of way. I think that we open books and read poems because we know that there is someone who has found the words for feeling we are longing to express.

And perhaps it's a bit self indulgent, as a reader, to want to be seen by a writer. But I am glad that Kat has indulged us anyways. *Rice, Grains and Golden Frames* is an emotional revelation from start to finish. I imagine that years from now, it will be seen as one of the great works of its time. It is filled with beauty, and joy, and pain, and quiet contemplation, loud and unabashed love, and so much wisdom – which makes it a perfect reflection of its author.

Harar Hall

Rice Grains & Golden Frames is a testimony to Kathleen Charles' personal journey into the phenomenal human that she has and is still becoming. A journey of pain and necessity, that describes how loving oneself is a continuous battle, in a world that cannot accept you wholely, for who you are.

Love and ecstasy navigates us through the unlearning process that a child raised by the catholic church might experience. So many of us grew up being shamed to explore our bodies and express who we love, when in fact we are worthy of all that our body may desire: love, desire, and pleasure.

Not only does this masterpiece serve as a rebellious guide to self-love, but it also serves as a powerful retelling of Haitian culture and ancestral knowledge. Every poem weaves us into a creole household, where the smells and decorations are as vivid as if we grew up in that home. I can hear my ancestors whispering words of wisdom into my ears, and guiding me to my becoming.

As we are going through uncertain and tumultuous times in 2020, Kathleen's manuscript is the touch of magic that we all need in our bookshelves. I have learned that our individual treasures are found in our inner divinity, and our strength is in the collective stories that weave our path to self-actualize. I encourage you to be fierce in loving yourself by any means necessary, this is a revolution that everyone can get behind.

Martha Nduwayo

pain & necessity

i wish i could google what's up with my emotions.
like…wish i could google where the heck my life is going
i wish google maps could find me an itinerary
for self-actualization.

wish the roadmap to becoming could be grasped by the simple sterile codes
of a wireless world

i bet it would go something like...
head northwest on *toxic relationships street* towards *avenue break your own heart*
turn right on *social media addiction boulevard*
turn right again on *binge eating lane*
on your left you'll see *communication and therapy drive*
but avoid that by all means
continue straight onto *low self-esteem, body shaming and colorism*
keep going for a good two...maybe three years

then take the exit at Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
continue onto *Audrey Lorde*

towards *Bell Hooks* and *Ava Duvernay*

when you turn 20 years old, take a right at *oh shit! i'm gay!*
right after that take a sharp left at
i don't want to be a doctor road

and from there...you decide where you need to go

road map to becoming

there once was a girl who loved sucking on rainbow ice
under a merciless sun

the king called her a princess, so she believed him
carelessly licked the rainbows from her fingers

as if there would always be more juice to stain white dresses

on the night the television lost its appeal
and queen ran out of glitter to spread on her face
princess watched as king built an underground railroad

for them to escape the wild men

a tunnel to save their magic
so princess and queen obeyed

but the tunnel closed behind them
the king stayed in their castle

because white men... or
wild men...needed something to feed on
whenever he returned it was only the ghost of him
a howling spectre
a beast with a short memory
a monster they could no longer trust
princess buried the memories of green velvet, castles on cliffs, and carnavals
of her kingdom

there were no gardens on this railroad
the sun didn't love her in this tunnel
like it did before
pale faces adorned the walls
they told her she wasn't a princess here
so, she believed them

/ /

i bet you didn't know that the tears running down your face
are your body's way of bathing you in saltwater to cleanse your scars

an instinctual licking of wounds
a cry for help yet simultaneous compassionate caress

crying is never just crying
tears are never just tears

it's a necessary bathing ceremony

a necessary overflowing of pain you've grown too weary to contain

the proof is in the relief you feel
once the water evaporates from your cheeks

or the heaviness you feel
so, you cry some more

and you're left with salty reminders
maps traced on your face to carry with you for the journey forward

/ /

Listen to "Breathe" by Seinabo Sey...

//

before the choice
i never really thought the darkest corners of my mind were worth loving

like caramel sun slowly fades from a room
as the day grows long
as my life grows old

i realize that i've been running in circles avoiding dark corners
full of the dusty, aching memories of a past better off forgotten

i thought
why not forget?

the days when brown barrette-haired baby girl was soiled with contempt
when she was painted a dirty delightful

when her smile never compared to cinderella tv-screen beauty
when the roundness of her body weighed more in her father's eyes
than any spelling bee trophy

i thought
why not forget?

grab a jump rope and skip over the lump in my throat because
who wants to remember that?

until it shows up in your sheets. in your celebrations.
the speed bump to every fast-paced night out trying to dance it away

eventually, the day came when i had not chosen myself so many times
that i began to wonder what scars unlicked and unloved tasted like

so, i gave in to the unfamiliar flavour of choosing my pain
closed my eyes and felt laughter

rise up from deep within the pit of my belly
from a place i've clouded with disdain

her laughter like cackles to my ears
her lost music is noise to me

she's small yet grand
three foot tall and beaming

i want to look away, but she asks me questions like…

what did i do wrong?

and why can't i play?

and why do you color me dirty?

and i… still don't know... what to say.

listening to her is a battle i fight with both arms
for embracing...and gathering the crystal salt grains left behind

i've been making myself a masterpiece with the colors in her joy
and the diamonds in her tears

i'm choosing the songs in my dark corners
the songs in my dust

in my cobwebs

i'm dancing with the memories that don't hurt
and forgiving the memories that do

i'm loving on my smile because
can't no magazine prescribe a little less round
to the happiness in my cheeks

or a lighter shade to my self-satisfaction
or a bit more shame to my sensual self-indulgence

i'm choosing not to feed on my own oppression

i'll dust off my abandoned playgrounds
and hang garlands on the swings

the choice

to sit here with all the unsightly pain
that led to the most dazzling moments of my life

choice

when she's hungry, feed her only the most colorful food

mother earth has to offer

when she's sad, guard her from those who would only deepen the wounds

when she's tired, carry her in your arms until you can gently lay her down
in a worthy resting place

curate spotify playlists for her bad days
soak her in affirmations at the break of dawn

massage her heart with poetry by sunset
entertain her mind with finest art the human mind could conjure

tend to her soul like you would Eden's garden
indulge in things that make her laugh

cherish her lessons
fertilize her potential

cater to her
protect her
challenge her
love her…

instructions on how to love myself

even the finest artwork must be set in fire to harden

solidify

stabilize

before it can glisten on display
pottery bowls must burn

a journey through flames
a gift christened by the lights of hell

so, what makes you think
that your journey will be any different?

when they say hard work
they mean sharp work

you'll rise and fall like the pointed peaks
and low valleys on the bellies of blades for this

the work will cut

you will spill blood for this
you will walk through fire to receive this gift

you'll give blood for the honey
for the gift

it's a living thing

a breathing, burning, bleeding thing
it needs to know that you're ready

blood, blades & honey

i am not a chalice

i am the liquid gold pagans drink with wet lips
impatient

with warm tongues

dripping
begging
yearning

crying out for body blood and spirit

when you meet the God in you

pouring into your own hands becomes a prayer

you become praying pagan

drink from yourself with fervor
creating from yourself to honour all creation

/ /

This poem is the depiction of my inner experience during a guided meditation facilitated by D'bi Young Anitafrika on May 19th, 2018 during a workshop offered by Sisters in Motion Mtl...

the leaves crinkle beneath my feet
as i walk towards the sound of running water

running music

sensual
soothing

the sight finally sets upon me
setting sun reflecting upon a virgin lake

untouched by the chaos of men & their machines
a humbling sight for eyes that have not yet truly seen

like watching gold dance on liquid glass

i sit

in wonder

in peace

make myself one with the dirt and wet leaves
warm brown skin on warm brown soil

as it should be

but calm is interrupted to give fruit to growth
the water beckons more forcefully this time

closer...it calls

so, i give in to the pull

on my hands and knees, i approach the lake's edge to witness my reflection

only

it's not *my*… reflection
or at least that's what i tell myself

the woman in the lake is Grand
a fountain of grey wisdom & artistic fire

she is my past, present, future and all i desire
come to life at once

her piercing gaze a soft steady rhythm
a melody sung sure, confident and pure

the woman in the lake is Grand
looks at me with love in her hands

blows me kisses and bows in my honor

i wonder how so much favor could fall upon her
for her to shine the way she does …

i wonder how so much favor could fall upon me
for my reflection to be

nearly as wonderous
as the woman in the lake

i take her hand.

we dive deep. her world is complex and filled with shapes and patterns i somehow understand. her battles like mine are ongoing, but the way she swims through conflict tells me that life gets easier when you move with it. she looks me in the eyes, with the artwork in her gaze and says

thank you...

to me...

for getting her there.

we cry warm tears re-emerging onto the brown wet sand by the lake side.

my return to the forest feels less heavy. i carry patches of her confidence and relics of her wisdom in my memory. i promise to engrave them into my skin, so i don't forget. light washes over the forest as my eyes open...with her song forever in my ear…

the woman in the lake

have you met the ursula in your undertones?
the theodora hiding in your dimples?
the cruella in your charisma?

faced her naked in complete darkness
ran your finger across the dryness of her skin

no…

your underworld is unknown to you

you've never caressed your malice a day in your life
never made love to your ugly

and i don't see why you wouldn't
it's yours after all

but you insist

you color her ugly
so uglier she grows

/ /

take your time feeling the weight of grief on your chest
allow teardrops to sink in the soil of the earth
your mother

sing your sorrows in her ear
and when you're done dancing in devastation
over an emptiness you don't understand

adorn your body with the same fine cloth your grandmother wore
and her mother before her
and her mother before her
one wrapped around your womb
another around your crown

make yourself a celebratory feast for one
blast music that inspires your hips to sway from side to side
shake your ass in front of the sizzling stove top
let the spices fill your lungs as they chant your praise

remember …
this is not a forgetting of grief
this is not a sweeping under the rug of unsightly monsters
this is an invitation

invite your monsters to the dinner table

feed them the meal you made while twerking until you were tired
share with them a feast made in their honour
raise a toast to knowing that there will always be better days

mare ren'w

may you master the storm of your raging thoughts
may you learn to dance to rhythm of your own thunder

may you learn to make your body sway in ways
that charm the inner tsunami to rest

may the rain pouring from your eyes fall sweetly to your chest
may you appreciate that you've done your absolute best…

may you fall with forgiveness
may the tears water the garden in your heart and give you fruit for resilience

may you rise
may you run

towards your dreams and never look back
and on your way there make sure to pour golden prayers

into every aching heart crack

/ /

i am a woman that stands on guitar strings wavering in the wind
whistling through the palm trees of a negro island that set herself free
mambo burgundy blood and bass beat basanovas trickling down my spine

i can be shy at times

but every day is a lesson on how to stand in my house

painted crass by the world
when the day breaks, i peel away the prejudice in the walls of my reflection

strip the camouflage from my voice
and on the days… i can remember to do so

i sing to myself
always with a song to sing for

knowing that no amount of poetry will certify me with self-love

the writing will continue for as long as there is life there will be stories to tell
and wounds to mend with words

i'm renovating the painful ways i've seen myself by crafting
new tinted glass perspectives to look through

drawing my body as it is and not as you see it

i'm painting her a maverick maroon
rebellious rejection of the garment i was gifted
from the hands of a world that never knew how to love a black body

i find myself wanting to be naked
in all the ways i know and all the ways that terrify me

i'll frame my nudity with wet fingers
tracing the outlines of places i've spent too little time in

places i'm coming to see as sunset gold

i'll keep portraits of them, to savour the wish that i could perhaps always walk through the world this bare...this bold.

in the perk of my cheeks i see the bread my grandmother made
so her daughter could light her way
to bigger cities and husbands that don't leave

in my lips i see the courage of my father to dream beyond his faults
in my eyes the wit of my mother
in my hands the roadmaps of people
who tried to run their way past bondage but grew too weary

the body of someone imagined looks like a place to be cherished

the body of a healer looks like a place for healing

in the ways that it takes up space
in the ways that it makes room
for myself and for the overflow

to nourish, to create, to stretch hips so wide they burst at the seams
of a system holding me in

no longer

dictating my vision
no longer

tryna tell me what i should see in the mirror
no longer

get your dirty definitions out my face

cuz i can see me for my damn self

this body
is the weapon i wield

to mold into shapes that serve me

i speak with it the languages i taste but cannot pronounce

the words i feel at the tip of my tongue
let them flow to the tips of my fingers

arms, chest and legs will form a voice you can hear
in every ripple of my footsteps
like a promise

to root, to uphold, to weather storm after thunder-clapping storm
for me...and only me

heart like a metronome counting me in time for every moment

from my lovemaking
to my ceremonious sorrow

this land is mine

this land is mine

this day shall never be forgotten as the day the blood river ran dry.

the day that a curse was lifted because she no longer chose to call it a curse

lifted the curse by changing the name

lifted the curse by rebranding her pain

spoke to the fire woman in her in search of answers

she said you're the only one with the power to be
your own perceptual marketing team

she said a curse ain't nothing but a gift you can't open
until you find the key in leaning into it

so, she rose from the blood river gifted

soon as she rose, her curse was lifted

and the blood river ran dry

/ /

the playground princess in me wants to love abundantly
recklessly

free like waterfalls pour
make the world a feast with my joy

just give for the sake of giving
and love for the sake of loving whoever i want because…

it's so much harder with all the rules
and there's so much in me to offer

tell me…
why wouldn't you want this?
the way it boils in my hands for you…

i wanna scatter it around the kitchen to table for all to see
however, in the eyes of all, i witnessed a heartbreaking hesitation
that taught me why hurt people hurt people

a childish part of me has always dreaded the day my heart would freeze over
like the lakes that take forever to hear summer sing her song

i'm sure i've been avoiding it at all costs
because i want my love to blaze

uninhibited, instinctive, honest
with a naked innocence

but… i'm learning that

waterfalls need oceans to fall
feasts need soil to serve
and i need love to give love

i need some of it to stay burning in me to keep me warm
some of it to linger on my tongue

so i can remember what it tastes like
let it linger so i remember just how good it feels to drink from myself

so, when loving another begins to feel like caressing a cactus
like swimming in a river of stone

or gifting gold to a soul who can't see

i'll withhold all of this glorious light inside of me

i'll do backflips in it
swing on its vines and lavish it all over my chest

of course…

i'll let you see it if you like
may even let you come play and have a taste

but i won't pour unless you can make music out of me
unless you're open enough to pour back

i hope that the little girl in me isn't disappointed in my resolution
i hope she knows that my heart is still on my sleeve for those who need it

that i'll still fly my heart around like a kite
in a world where it's not allowed

but i won't be auctioning it off to any bidder...
neither the highest, nor the lowest

it's not to be given or swept away like in the story books
my heart is to share
for all those ready and willing

how to love recklessly & unscathed

within the depths of your own person
there is no such thing as a destination

white cis straight men taught us how to run so...

we run everywhere

to work

to love

to peace

thinking someday we're sure to arrive
but like the forests we burn

life provides no neat trails for us to blaze through

you will always struggle with this
whatever this may be

one day though
you'll just struggle with skill

//

close your eyes

now rub them
rub them hard

harder!

do you feel the film disguised as reality framing
your perception of you?

the colors the world has kissed you with are not your own
so blow the hydroquinone dust off your shoulders

branded coarse by colonial tinted glasses
that you now wear to the movies, to the mall…

to the mirror

there's a fog sitting thick between who you are and who they painted you to be

except

you're not the world's mona lisa
daughter of amina and nzingha
sidekick to gina and lisa

not the one they lavish in praise or fame
so, you build yourself a new golden frame

raise your voice.

open your mouth and show me how you're black from the inside out
smakin' black gums and freckled tongues
spit on em' for all i care

you betta show me you remember the sound of your own heart

when we were younger…

people mistook our soil for unclaimed grounds
where our black could be molded

into a monstrosity we would not recognize but would believe in regardless

however, the songs still ring in your ears i know you can hear
the dissonance, when they claim your black is an angry, manly,
dense, witch...

i know the sound of their slander feels off-pitch

but the witch part they got right...

hold on to what you know
whatever you water grows
whatever you frame golden glows

tired of runnin' from sun and rain
so you build yourself a new golden frame

i wanna see you dance in the dark
light it up with your fire
fold forward in prayer to the garden that birthed empires

black as voluptuous, black as erotic, black as moonlight
black as royalty round, black as all naps no lye
black as all joy no sin
black woman as nectar dripping abundantly for you to stand tall in

no blacker berry than you
no sweeter juice than you
no greater passion than your own flame
so... you build yourself a new golden frame

golden frame

your beauty exists

loudly

beyond any shadow
of any doubt

walk it around with head high, shoulders wide
saucy and always with somethin' to say

it's yours to decorate
so, act like it

in case you forget

love & ecstacy

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise?

That I dance

Like I've got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs?

- Maya Angelou

Sex positivity is decolonizing

Sex positivity is activiely anti-racist

- Erika Hart

When I was five and some change, I remember running around the flea-market
my aunt worked in, looking at the things people had to sell.
Paintings, dusty furniture, haircuts, lemon pepper wings...
lost or stolen jewelry, *Just for Me* perms and lotion
that smelled like too much perfume.

The flea-market was the biggest place I had ever seen, and I loved it because it
was the only place my aunt trusted enough to let me roam free.
Every adult there knew my little black behind belonged back at Mimi's shop …
so there was no way I could do anything too stupid.

There was a little brunette that I played with often. I don't remember her name,
but I remember that she was a year older than me and had eyes like she'd seen
beyond the market walls. Her English was better than mine, so we often didn't
speak. At some point we just started touching to communicate. A tap on the
shoulder meant "Follow me". Pointing with a smile meant "Look at this!".
A hug meant "I missed you". A kiss on the cheek meant "Goodbye".

One day, there was a different touch, and I didn't know what it meant...

but I liked it.

We made a nest in a dark nook behind my aunt's cash register whenever she left
her shop for lunch. For hours...we just touched. Here and there.
With giggles interrupting. I had a feeling this touch meant
"I want to know what you taste like.".
We made jungle gyms out of each other and often didn't want to leave.

Eventually, above the sound of this newfound fun we heard footsteps.
I wasn't scared until I saw her eyes. She was scared...
as if the situation was familiar. When my aunt saw us, the anger made her pull
us off of each other with one hand. She grabbed my friend by the shirt and
dragged her to her mother, then me to my mother.

My mom wasn't upset. She paid no mind to my aunt as she rambled on about
"You won't believe what your daughter was doing behind the cash register!".
Mom plopped me onto her lap and dried my tears. Although I wasn't punished,
they never let me play with the brunette ever again...
and I never got to kiss her goodbye.

lesson number one… your pleasure is wrong.

i'm on a journey of learning that…

things that taste good

in my mouth
between my thighs
on my neck
and on my breasts
are mine to keep

that

the things that bring me pleasure

are good.

that i am worthy of indulgence
of craving
of excess
of desire and ecstasy
of fire and frenzy

fuck dipping my toes in the water
i'm diving in

into every inch of your body
and every inch of my own

our black bodies the forbidden fruit of knowedge they told us would taste bittersweet

not all revolutions happen in the streets

this uprising…
will take place between straps & satin sheets

/ /

i couldn't figure out how to fit all the words necessary to describe
just how much i desire you in one sentence.

so, i kissed you.

in hopes that folded lips could pray better than words ever could

/ /

our mother who art in heaven
mighty be thy name
thy queendom come
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven
give us this day our daily orgasm
bless us this day our holy roots
bless us this day with the power in truth
and forgive us our trespasses
against ourselves
unknowingly
ethereal beings that we are
as we reclaim our bodies from those who've trespassed against us

for we are far more than objects of temptation

and we were never the bearers of evil
and we were never cultivators of sinful fruit
and we were never sultry soil for sabotage
and we were never their vessels to be filled
and we were never mere ribs to be taken
and we were never bodies unworthy of bliss
and…
our blood never was
and never will be
dirty…

for thine is the queendom
the power and the glory
forever and ever

/ /

i touched myself this morning

and the world didn't end
and the demons didn't rise

and God didn't give a shit

in fact

i'm sure i saw her smile...

she was too busy touching herself

/ /

there are places on your body that will set aflame
when you think of them

the deep cavern of your chest will light ablaze as they speak eloquently and
with ambition in their eyes

the wet sea born where your thighs embrace will boil
as words like

kiss

beautiful

&

moist

candidly drip from their lips
the divine in them lighting up the divine in you

them

i searched for the dry petals
abandoned at the foot of her bed

i scoured for the spirits she spilled on the kitchen floor
after a night debating whether the world was worth loving anymore

i looked for her laughter in the wrinkles of white bed sheets
like angels search for God in the clouds

i dipped my fingers through the salted bath water
where she drowned her pain
i thirsted for her like flowers thirst for rain

shouted her name into the sparkling water she left to die flat
all the while knowing…

her stars would never lead her back

willing to love even if just to lose love

i'm not in love with you, but i got mad love for you
love that every second i'm around you my soul turns on
hate that i need to be around you for my soul to turn on…

you… firework of a human being
i'm discovering lost reflections of myself in the radicality of your being

like shattered glass shards on the ground… i follow you in hopes
to find the same kind of electricity in myself

you were my "intro to fuck what they think 101"
"intro to be your best self 101"

a "jump first, think later" type bitch
a walking lesson in overalls

a well of melodies untamed

i drank from you until i was drunk
followed you to nightly dances until my feet
could no longer bear the weight of our frenzy

became intoxicated by your smoke until i was high enough to wonder
how can someone shine so bright...
they have you wanting to blaze for days?

but again..i'm not in love with you… just got mad love for you

you told me to name my vagina
tell me why my first thought was to name it after the story you tell
by adorning your skin with the finest artwork

my first thought was to name it after the way you hold a bass guitar
like a woman begging for more

how you serenade serenity into the air with your
sensual-saxophone-playin'-ass
tell me why my first thought was to name it after something that sounds like
the scratch of my nails digging into your back

but on second thought...

you empowered me to name her in the language of my ancestors

name her lewa, name her beautiful
name her mimo, name her sacred

my friends want to know what you did to me…
and i painfully respond that you did… absolutely nothing

all the impact i mistook for you crashing into me was actually a result of me crashing deeper into myself

growing deeper into myself...
because the world brought you into my life to show me
just what i was capable of...

and so, so much more.

so, no… i'm not in love with you… but i got mad love for you.

mad love

there's no organized or dainty way to eat a mango

this kind of fruit from the earth will make you humble
forget your systems

you'll find art in carving away the garment of this fruit
without ever lifting your blade

you'll need to free both hands for this
feast with your whole face for this

get down on your knees for this
juice dripping down your chin and into your breast
until there's nothing left

but wet fingers and wet palms
curled toes, eyes rolled and salted skin...

her juice
spread all over your good linen

mango

the woman in me knows her worth
she has traveled oceans with the extension of her reflections

swum from sea to shining sea in her dreams
tips of her braids dipped in the gold she's amassed
from loving the poor and reading the rich

body adorned with the fine art, incense and jewelry she's savoured
from visiting different planes

so…
before you tell me how you love me with your hands

i need you to show me that you know me with your voice
sing my name in your sleep

shout the colors of my imagination to everyone who's ever loved you
serenade me in the streets like a fool
singing songs only my heart can hear

however…

never lose yourself in me
because i need you whole
i need you holy
i need you human

i need you free

why bring me flowers when you can show me a garden
the one you've been tending to all your life

don't seek my affection if the petals of your garden crinkle beneath your feet

i need you watered and well

only bring me there if you can show me
the purple irises you've planted for wisdom

and the basil you've cherished for peace

oh, darling bless me with your bloom

i'll be the morning dew caressing your petals

wet as they reveal to me
the undying treasures of your majesty

opening petals like you open your lips
open your petals and i'll open my lips…

petals

salt river water and hibiscus
steel strings and intertwined kisses

coconut oil on fingers
and arms
and shoulders
and neck
sand on her skin

waterfalls rushing down the depth of her voice
body doused in hot water steaming curves

incense dancing in the dark

that's what she looks like…

the girl who stole my heart

/ /

her name is auburn skin
caramel complexion

fingers scarred from trying to make the moon
fall for her through song
drums beneath her every footstep and soul as
deep and electric
as her bass line
a smile igniting joy
eyes beckoning & coy

i dare not write of her

for fear of where the pen will take me
i dare not desire someone so breathtaking
for fear of never breathing again
fire breathing
breath taking auburn skin
when you take my breath away
will you promise to take me with you?

/ /

i need your arms around me…before the mob finds me
i need your love to guide me
so the mob
won't find me

they wanna
burn me at the stake
they wanna
drown me in the lake
they say
our love is a mistake

i'm
a witch
is what they say

lay me down
in your hearts fire
if i must drown
it'll be in your loves water

lay me down
into our desire
if i must drown
it'll be in your loves water

/ /

we were born with two mouths
one for speaking truth
singing poetry
kissing
eating blessings
and tasting fruit

the other mouth...is only for savouring touch
and letting live those we allow
this one has no tongue
but many lips for opening when in ecstasy
and closing when in defense

we were born with two voices
one in our throat
the other at the root of our thighs

both voices must be acknowledged for us to be whole and powerful
both mouths must be opened
as much as we wish
allowed to taste and drink
lest we risk starvation
of body and soul

two voices

salt.

lick.

drink.

lime.

kiss.

repeat.

i lost my words when i saw you dance to the heavy sunshine beat

framing your hips in my hands

cheek to cheek

breast to breast

i found my words in the warm moist crevice of your chest

found them again at the end of your tunnel as we kissed the further i reached

into you

vulva on brown skin… we dance

a sound escape

a sacred romance

cis men will often ask why...

baffled and flustered they wonder where the appeal lies
and we laugh responding that it's just...different

but there must be more, they press on
so, i've found an explanation...not that they deserve one
but here it is

when you start seeing sex as an experience instead of an endeavor…

you'll understand the magic we've found in each other

a magic we're willing to protect from hands sullied with ignorance
boundaries have been broken that encompassed
the meager extent of your understanding

gender

heteronormativity

binary

these are all shattered glass shards we've cleared from our kitchen floors
making room to cook up sweeter things

love can be bigger
it can be vast

it can be multiple
forgiving, compassionate, tender

and we will tend to her garden whether you recognize her flowers or not

lovely new healing herbs have blossomed to cradle us into this experience
and we accept the rocking, the alluring, the throbbing,
the panting, lip-biting…call of it all

regardless of the salt in your stare

we lick

we drink

we bite

and suck sour lime

we kiss

and repeat.

cheers

you know what i hate most about not being straight?

i've been stuck trying to navigate the murky waters
that blur the lines between friendship and romantic love

do i wanna love her or be her?
do i wanna fuck her or friend her?
which one is it?

but the beauty of existing in this liminal space has taught me that
i'm missing the point

the same fire i feel in romance can burn in me for my friends
in the fact, these are the sweetest friendships to hold

the heat feels familiar, but when you look closer
the light burns a different color

i wish this kind of love upon every human being
to feel so strongly committed to another human that
your bond flows between the two of you like blood

it's only natural that our minds conditioned to see friendship and love as mandatory opposites get confused when the feelings ascribed to one overlap with the experience of another.

now, i swim in this space
and i let love be what she wants

my gay taught me how to love

golden tears don't hurt less because they shine

beauty can be delicious to the tongue

but sometimes bittersweet

i'd scour the world to make you mine

but you'd still fall ill at my feet

i asked the God in me why i loved you

she told me you reminded me of a world i felt i couldn't save...

but would die trying

/ /

i'm amazed by how she responds to touch
how she throws herself into it

how she celebrates the slightest grazing of my fingers on her skin
with a storm of music

how her body rises and falls like the tide

this

must be what it feels like to be the moon

the sun welcomes us into the morning,

and i …
am wrapped
in her …

cushioned by her heartbeat and the butterflies in her stomach
the bed is a garden i don't want to leave

a nest
so sweet, i've convinced myself that…

if Eve had a chance to choose either Adam or the Snake
to remain with her in Eden forever
i'm sure she'd choose the Snake

/ /

you've forgotten how freedom felt
as a sensation

on your skin
on your tongues
on your lips
from the pits of your stomachs to the treasures between your legs

the taste of bliss is not blasphemy

you've forgotten the eroticism of Oshun
how a vagina is not prey to be conquered

rather an avid, swallowing, ravening gateway
with the power to decide who to bless with either entry or emergence

you've forgotten the husbands of Nzingha and their maiden attire
you've forgotten how she was king

my heart breaks with every spoken ignorance
of how boundless you are
in every sense of the word

my sweet
i beg you

pull the arrowheads of your colonizer
out from the pleasure in your spine

whether you be warrior, mother, courtesan, artist, activist, king, queen...or
both...please be…
whomever you please

letter from an ancestor watching

I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry
as well as of her hidden angers.

- Audre Lorde

drums & ancestry

Toto Bissainthe performed the poem "Monologue" in 1996, just a year before I was born. If you listen to it, you'll understand how she captured a feeling that made me fall in love with her forever. This Haitian singer, actress, poet, activist was often running around performing different gigs throughout her career, enlightening the masses with the soul in her voice and the power in her spirit. On the set of a movie released in 1996, named "L'Homme sur les Quais" directed by Raoul Peck, Toto Bissainthe was once again starring in a role that would shake the nation. She was the Nina Simone of Quisqueya Boyo.

Her hairstylist on that set...was a modest medical student trying to pay her way to graduation.

Her name was Marie-Clautilde Emelyne Dajuste... Emelyne was very close to Toto. She became more than her hairstylist. Emelyne was her confidant...Emelyne is also my mother.

I don't know what this means or why I'm telling you this, but I do know that something about the way Toto was so strong-willed and rebellious against many of the conventions of her society...all while being deeply in love with her culture and her people...makes me believe that not all of our ancestors belonged in their time. Some of them were ready for the kind of freedom we can create now in this world...some of them were ready for us.

//

ask your mother why you can't touch yourself
without feeling as if God were watching

your mother was a nun.

ask your grandmother why you sometimes still feel like
you should serve the men in your life

your grandmother was a waitress.

ask your great grandmother why you sometimes feel undesirable

invisible

like a nonexistent, inviable object of desire

your great grandmother was … you don't know her name…

when my mother admitted to me that she once was possessed with the desire to
pursue an openly lesbian woman among the professionals in
la haute bourgeoisie haitienne

but stopped herself because she didn't think she'd be a "good lesbian"…

i understood why our parents beat us when they wanted to cry

and ignored us when they wanted to laugh

it dawned on me...that i'd have to hold their hands

and teach them how to eat forbidden fruit with shattered teeth

/ /

i come from the drums
from the mango trees & fried plantain scented
woven straw furniture living rooms
i come from the cities paved with dirt roads
houses painted pink, yellow, blue and gold
because the people i come from
knew how colorful life needs be
even in the midst of tragedy

i come from drunken rooms filled with laughter dipped in rum
from the depths of bellies satisfied with modest fried scraps
but boy they taste good don't they…
seasoned with loving hands dripping wet with vinegar
adorned with mortar and pestle crushed herbs...like fine jewelry
hands that pounded and twisted and pulled harmonious flavour out of hell
for the ones they loved

i come from heated dance ceremonies
from feet pounding wet dirt
bodies draped in white cloth
panting out of body
chanting out of mind
ascending into spirit

women teaching men the ways of the land with the way they sway their hips
to the rhythm in the wind
to the rhythm from within
to the music in the sin
the sin that it was, to boldly bask in the beauty of their existence
despite the ugliness of their bondage

i come from the drums
i come from sweet sweat dripping from ebony skin
sun stinging as they worked through sugar cane fields stretching
as far as the eye could see
who knew that cutting through miles of sugar…
could feel so bittersweet?

i come from the drums
the drums they made to beat away the pain under pale moonlight
the drums they made to remind their hearts
that there was something worth beating for…

still

i come from the sweet songs they sang so they wouldn't hear the screams
i come from the sweet sweet... sweet love they made in silence
hushed love making
a magic they needed protected from violence
i come from the drums
i come from the joy that rose like winding fruit through concrete
under the darkest of circumstances

i come from the drums
i come from the music that broke through chains
i come from drums beat by bloody hands
beat to shake the land
beat till they were sore
beat through years of war

so dare i…
take pride in this heart beat their praying palms pounded for...
until the freedom in the rhythm came to life
and my eyes opened
a black baby born
risen into the light

i come from the drums

a plea from haiti's adbaraya toya[1]

Before reading this poem, please see the notes explaining all underlying history at the end of this chapbook.

do you have any idea… who i am?

i could rip these sugar canes down to their threads
and sweetly slice you to pieces

do you have any idea… who i am?

a fire

a fury

a mother

unruly

i am a general from the Dahomey[2] army that made white men question…

whether manhood was a strong enough weapon on its own.

my ranking is Adbaraya. my name is Toya. Dahomey soldier
not at all at your service.

we conquered conquerors to the rhythm of our collective footsteps

to the music of our all-powerful bodies

combat was a choreography

was a ritual, was a holy reclaiming of what you thought was yours,
but in fact belonged to everything that lives..
and even everything that doesn't.

oh

ki jan ou fè inyoran konsa…
ki jan ou fè bèt konsa?

vous ne savez même pas

you have no idea who i am.

to keep from insanity and to maintain my humanity i planned to take my life[3]
and free myself from the likes of you…but
i chose to stay
to teach these supposed slaves how to turn predator into prey

you beat them to a point of amnesia
africans of this island have forgotten the markets they ruled,
the languages they spoke

the poetry they wrote... forgotten
the music they made, the potions they saved
the sensual collective beauty in which they bathed

my heart goes out to the slaves
who would have stood side by side with me in battle

with the way they wrap their crowns and the viciousness they carry in their stare
i no longer see the swing in their hips or smell the sweet spices on their skin

they've forgotten...

how we used to be so much more than their women... livestock, property

cattle producing machines

a meager to non-existent duality within the languages from before our passage
we walked with the seed bearers on level water

oftentimes rising above their heads

so, imagine…

imagine how high

we could rise

above the heads of men with skin as white as the powdered face of zombies
men who fear the sun & hide their fear behind guns

don't you understand?

in the *N'Nonmiton (or Moni)*[4]… we were men…

you could not convince us otherwise

let "man" be nothing but a three-letter word
& we seized it for ourselves in the hearts of our palms closing
slowly grinding it to thin sand
we stand in its power just as they do

we were men living in bodies capable of birthing life itself
one foot in masculinity and the other in femininity…

we defied the duality in laws unwritten
we were transcendent

we often sang of how we were better men than men…and we were treated as such

although deemed wives of the king and thereby bound by chastity…

i assure you that our lovemaking remained rhythmic

with feminine courtesans eager and charismatic

on call at all times to quench our thirst

just as they would in any other army

our bodies as weapons layed atop men beyond enemy lines
we sucked up the secrets in their semen…
then spilt their blood like red wine
you could say we fucked them to death
literally sometimes…

notre pluralité dépassait les frontières de leur compréhension

notre liberté n'était pas dans leur vocabulaire

we existed in a world where women married women to build status
and roamed the streets as one

èske ou komprann mwen?
èske ou tande'm?

are you hearing me when i claim… we existed on a completely different plane

one of freedom
one of pleasure
one of strength

please…i pray….may the descendants meant to walk from my womb

come to this plane again.

black... lady

bag.... lady

you ain't been yourself lately

you gon' ... hurt your back

carryin'... all... them... baaaaaaaaaaags

lady

/ /

the women who raised you had mastered the art of balancing
their entire enterprise on their own heads

baskets abundant, overflowing with enough fruit to feed a nation
all while cradling the future of the nation wrapped up on their backs

understandably

you saw this as a metaphor to mean that you in turn must now balance the world
atop your own skull

black woman
goddess of the sun
mistress of rivers and mother of forests
sister of soil and mounter of mayhem

put the world down for today

today we breathe

today we drink

today we are righteously unburdened

and still

fruitful

marchande de fruits

i once saw my aunt hold a burning napkin
and as the fire approached her fingertips
she brought the whole napkin into her palm
and put the fire out with the skin of her fist
no sign of pain on her face

that day i understood how the women in my family are accustomed
to withstanding the burn of fires
accustomed to using their bodies to douse flames
accustomed to sacrificing their bodies to end chaos
taming the wild, burning places of the world

and even when they can't tame them,
they still sit in the burning ramifications of bondage
so the babies never have to suffer the merciless heat of white fire

i knew then that the original fire fighters were women
fire women

walk into the pits of revolutionary warfare unafraid
walk out unscathed

or do they?

i recognize the legacy passed down to me
is that of the woman in the fire
but

as the world sets ablaze
i will be the first
to refuse to stand in the flame

let it burn

we've sacrificed enough

woman in the fire

how many years have you twisted and fainted at the arrival of your own blood?

taking pills to mask the war waging in your womb
the soil mother knows your plight and for this as for all things
she has a potion

well before the moon cycle begins
well before the blood begins to run wild
take one ginger root
slice into pieces
blend
boil in water
the red raspberry leaf will save you if you let it

steep

black strap molasses are valiant when abundant and pure
call on coconut sugar to seduce you
blend these blessings into one cohesive concoction

heat
sip
bleed
breathe

for those who bleed

momma told me
when life gives you lemons
squeeze the juice into the vase water of your wilting roses
when life gives you salt
sprinkle it in every corner of your home so it becomes a haven
so it can season the energy that bathes you morning and night

momma told me
when life gives you lemons
cut them into six small wedges
let them lay by your bedside
and as you sleep
let them absorb the nightmares of self doubt
and negativity from your dreams

momma told me
when life gives you tears
collect them in a jar and hold onto them as if they were diamonds
then show the jar to your daughters; your princesses
tell them that in this jar lies their family jewels
so they never forget how much struggle is required to baptize
a queen

momma is the queen of the land i call home
the land from which i emerged
i am the sweetest fruit she has ever grown
momma was raised a catholic nun in a church cradled by the mountains of Haiti
when she realized that even heavenly priests and bishops
could commit hell-bound crimes

she fled the mountains and claimed her crown in rebellion
fled a life of lies but still calls herself a christian
fled from the comfort of religion
and into the glory of science
my mother made herself a dentist.

that is the kind of strength that runs through my veins
through sunshine and through rain
i take pride in the history of my homeland
the history of my queen
her courage glistens in my blood like the finest armor any knight has ever seen.

my mother wears pearls to the corner store
a gown to the gas station
so no one can ever deny her royalty
although her education cannot be recognized by the superficial eyes
of a caucasian country

she's carved a throne out of the electric chair
reserved to those sentenced to poverty

she's gained the strength to ignore pain that would kill the common man
she's made a queendom out of the immigrant's wasteland
she calls forth respect from everyone with her voice and a flick of her hand

like rain calls upon flowers to rise up from fertile ground
her voice always a command, never a question
her choice: to work long hours for minimum wage
so that i can somehow escape this poverty cage
we've been forced to survive in for nearly a decade

a queen in disguise
so poised, so wise
i bury my tears in her lullabies
she sings sweet folkloric songs to console me
for this reason, and this reason only

i am and forever will be

my mother's keeper

the queen's apprentice

canvas where all her wildest desires come to life
revolution of her innocence

i am the library of her every crown-burning venture
i am the ax steadily breaking iron chains

i am the healing vessel where her wild came to live

momma told me

my mother's favorite color is yellow
her preferred jewelry always gold
she taught me that no finer metal could ever adorn a woman's skin
no brighter color could ever mimic joy with such precision
my mother puts yellow everywhere and on everything
turmeric in her food
golden bottles of perfume on her dresser
it was the brightening accessory to a life made uncertain
by men who's promises slipped through their fists like water
and countries who put prices on things like
equal opportunity
and peace

somewhere along the line i began to see Oshun's yellow in my mother's gold
how yellow seeped into her thoughts and made her believe things a black woman
wasn't supposed to believe in her time
that spirituality and religion were not one in the same
that women were more than just spare ribs
that sex isn't wrong
that sex...is something...sweet
to be approached with curiosity and undying attention

i clung to the radical scaffold she provided. the feminist politics she sang were my monkey bars. her irony and ambition were the seat to my swings...so i swung…

higher...and higher
into wiser age
i see now how the goddess of gold has made herself a river
through the generations of women in my family
how her patience has been growing weak
her outcries growing bold
begging for a decolonized descendance
weaving grains of rice into the cornrows
of my grandmother's revolt
of my mother's ideological emancipation
grains left behind for me to feed on
and thereby discover
a kind of sexual and spiritual liberation
they were only tantalizingly close
to discovering was necessary

grains & golden rivers

when your mother calls you a monster
don't cry for too long
she lives in a world where true majesty is a monstrous possibility

when your father buries the crown from when you were a princess
don't wish him the worst
the crown you wear now is fit for a new kind of royalty
the kind your parents never dreamed

forgive them for what they were never equipped to know
the kind of freedom that dangles from your hips like wind chimes
in Eve's apple tree
you are a frightful kind of free
and like good humans always do
they only know to be afraid of music their feet can't dance to

you see it only takes one ancestor down the line to wish for you
and as the generations stack up and pass through
the foretelling in their wish is forgotten
and life carries on as if there had been nothing to wish for
until here you are
and the household is shaken by the mere cries of your becoming
the bricks melt under the heat of your eruption
and there's nowhere to hide…
you're here now
more glorious than ever was imagined

so, when your mother calls you a monster…
don't cry for too long
it's hard to bring to life someone you don't recognize
it's hard to swallow that you may have only been the conduit
and not the conjurer
of this being you're now bound to

when you were still in her womb
no one told her your real name
so forgive her
for misnaming you

she was never taught to see the colors you can taste
so if you can
hold her hands even now

shower her in your patience and slowly teach her the ways of freedom
like you would teach a blind woman about the sun
tell her the stories of your escapades to the moon
and how you made love on saturn's rings

when your mother calls you a monster
don't cry
if you can

take her hand and show her the beauty in your beastly

/ /

ebony

even after all this healing
this holy rising
this untying of knots
this sacred affirming ascension
there's still all your filth in my face…

your precious systematic clockwork micro reminders
no need to remind me… i remember
i bet you didn't get the memo but
i'm their messenger
there's so much glass to smash
so much shit to balance
but my blood runs young
and i have so…so much time

/ /

all you hear is a siren…
a valiant saviour flashing in the distance
what sweet innocence
what pristine privilege
to hear the cries of red and blue lights
from that…thing
and actually believe…
that they've come to protect you…

huh…

must be nice.

i bet i'd walk with a little more skip in my step
if there was no shiver sent down my spine whenever i heard that noise
if my body didn't become as heavy as ten thousand kilos of burial caskets….

let it be… just in a song…
or a commercial
or that movie you made to meet diversity quota
watch my body still want to run
watch my throat dry up like pollenated cotton flowers

ask me again why i hate the police

i'd tell you that it's not the bullets themselves that terrify me
it's where they land

in the beating hearts of black bodies
that spilt all the good gold they had to give on your dirty pavement

i'd tell you that it's not the officers themselves that paralyze me
it's the power in their hands

the power to take me from my mother

six years old
no kicks, no screams, eyes wide, little hand stretched out and willing,
all the trust in the world for these walking toy soldiers in gold, silver and blue

yet

when they put me in the caged back seat
i felt like the circus animals momma would take me to see in the summer

the cold black leather seemed to remember my bare brown skin
something about the way it welcomed me so easily, the way i sunk in

my stomach twisted with a sinister knowing deep down
cuz they done told me a million times by now

baby don't ever call on the blues unless you wanna see their red

don't ever call on the blues lest you wanna see momma beg

don't ever call on the blues

don't ever call on the blues…

don't
don't
don't
don't
ever
ever
ever
ever
call.
call.
call.
call.
ever
ever
ever
call.
call.
call.
don't
don't
don't
ever
ever
ever
call.
call.
call.

years later…

i hear the sound of them approaching from miles away

on my way to work
while walking with a friend
while running in the park

and my body remembers

a chain reaction sparks

the grief seizes me again

the tears are still hot

the sorrow still salty

but all you hear is a siren…

/ /

ma mère savait préparer le riz avec une précision d'ensorceleuse
l'odeur de l'ail et l'huile de canola voyageait à travers la maison en dansant

venant jusqu'au sous-sol caresser mes narines un dimanche matin
annonçant la satisfaction d'un ventre plein

et la saveur réconfortante de riz et lait pour le petit déjeuner
comme nous commandait la sagesse traditionnelle

des mères qui avaient peu à donner à leurs enfants
mais le riz et le lait étant toujours présents malgré tout

on en faisait un festin matinal

elle adorait me voir manger
ses yeux brillaient d'une lumière de fierté

fierté d'avoir mis au monde
un enfant qui mange avec enthousiasme

avec appétit
la bouche *byen gou*
pour le repas de maman

comme si chaque bouchée contenait autant de musique qu'un carnaval

cependant, ce qui se passait ensuite m'a toujours fasciné
elle se levait pour se préparer un plat

et au lieu de se servir le riz d'un blanc immaculé
comme elle l'avait fait pour moi

elle grattait le fond de la marmite à la recherche des grains brûlés
ces grains morts-vivants formaient un délice choyé qu'on appelle le gratin

seules les bouches les plus âgées savaient l'apprécier

ma mère savait prendre la dureté du gratin en douceur et avec patience
je me demandais toujours… pourquoi

pourquoi toutes les grandes dames de ma famille
savouraient-elles le riz brûlé à volonté
si elles étaient toutes capables de préparer un riz somptueux
et digne de Dieu lui-même?

ne voyaient-elles pas la majesté que je les accordais?
mes yeux de petite fille voyaient en elles des reines de soleil

des reines de manguiers
des reins de palmiers
des reines de tambours
des reines…tout court

pourquoi se réservaient-elles les grains qui n'avaient pas échappé
aux flames de l'enfer?

avec le temps
ma bouche ayant pris la forme de l'âge

la forme jouisseuse d'une bouche de femme
ayant embrassé assez de fois pour être déçue

ayant levé la voix pour réclamer justice...
assez de fois pour me faire dire que ma voix de négresse valait mieux
si elle ne résonnait plus

le goût du gratin est devenu familier
il me rappelait une souffrance que je peinais à échapper

mais pour la simple raison que je parvenais à le survivre chaque jour
il valait la peine d'être célébré

gratin

on slav songs

It is the summer of 2018 in Montreal, and amidst the Jazz Festival, Robert Lepage is preparing to direct a play showcasing a majority of white actors singing African American slave songs. The play stars Betty Bonifassi (a white French Quebecer woman) who plays Harriet Tubman. Slav was inspired by one of Betty's musical endeavors that blends African, Siberian, Bulgarian, and Metis songs. Due to controversy, protests and outrage by the black community in Montreal and in other parts of North America…the play was cancelled. This is my response to said event.

do you not like to see me happy?

when faced with the beauty we've created
despite the beastly nature of our trauma,
do you feel uncomfortable?

do i make you angry when i smile?

do i make you jealous when i sing the songs that were
passed down to me through the gulf of Mexico,
into the thick, murky, waters of Louisiana swamps
just to reach the blood in my veins

as i stand here today
free and unchained

just like their wildest dreams told them i would be

can you not accept that some stories are not yours to tell?

not all stories will be yours to tell

not all songs are yours to use
recreate and dismember as you choose

because…you seem so uninformed: slavs never sang our african slave songs
just thought you should know

you who claim to not see color
yet drink avidly from a fountain that colors me black

would you walk into your grandmothers' home, see her 400-year-old curtains,
cut them up to make a dress… without even including her in your creative process?

don't you think she would be devasted to see
something she cared for
re-appropriated so violently

by someone who didn't even really try to understand the true story
behind grandmothers' curtains

let me tell you a story about my grandmother's songs...

my great great grandmother held me in her womb before i was even formed.
she knew the pain i would have to face one day, just as she had endured herself.

so, she did all she could do. she used her voice, the only thing she could use

she sang me a song.

it seeped deep into her body, split cracks through her bones
it sank and settled, crossed time and space to reach me

she sang me a song.

a promise that she'd always be there, like a faint call in the air
to sing me her lessons of despair

softly braiding, weaving maps
sneaking lullabies and rice grains of wisdom into my hair.
whispering "don't you cry for me child" because she'd never leave me lonely
that i would always have her song in my heart to soothe me

she sang me a song
so that i could keep it safe for her in the new world she believed would come.

refused to let them beat it out of her
even though they tried … to beat it out of her... till she was numb

she sang me a song

that crossed hills, valleys and countries not yet named, poured it into her like a river,
and nestled it into the safe soil of her body

she sang me a song

and now you.... you come along

and pluck
and pick
and hungrily collect and gnaw, saliva dripping from your mouth,
at pretty shiny things that must be yours, must be at your service…
because how could they not be?
why would they not be?

a sound so pure…so strong…must be yours…*n'est-ce pas*?

vous avez dit vouloir vous approprier de ces chansons...
vous avez dit vouloir vous approprier de nos chansons…

you can't play theatre with our stories
you can't play theatre with our pain

because no…
not all cultures and ethnicities suffer the same

my great great grandmother didn't sing those songs in sugar cane, cotton fields,
send them to me through the ears and hearts of generations for you
to use them in a way that erases my difference

in way that does not feature my voice
in a way that does not feature my body. the instrument it was made for

because…

my grand mother looked like me and not like you
because Harriet Tubman looked like me and not like you…

one thing i'm grateful for though
is that you untied our tongues
had this city seeing us for the first time.

you sparked the display of a rage
we had been sitting on for a while…but now…
we will let it breathe…a firey breath

because i will not hold back poetry as privilege is used
to twist, turn, tell, re-tell this story …

our stories

that can only be carried by our bodies, for only our bodies have been living them,
carrying them through time and space

so…

Betty… be still
sing your own songs at your will

because this…
if only this...

this belongs to us.

lip gloss, leather, gold hoop earrings swinging and afrobeat at daybreak
i've been whining my hips for hours now i can no longer tell left from right,
up from down

these sounds are calling my body to move in ways it remembers
i don't remember how it goes but i know it

the beat is in me

all i can feel is the bass booming through my feet and up into my chest
all i can see is our glistening ebony

i'm sure someone's finna call the cops
but let them come

their sirens ain't got nothing on this human ancestral need
to lust over dripping flesh

dance with me
they can't get to us here

their microaggressions will remain just that
microscopic

in comparison to our black bodies rejoicing

the mere fact that we're still here is a miracle
so, close your eyes

feel the revolution in your bouncing backside

just...dance with me

/ /

when the four walls of your classroom seem to stretch on forever

yet you still suffocate

alone in a crowd

of pale faces

no one to reflect your reality back at you

do you even exist?

no one to understand the rich culture painting the notes of your accent

do you even matter?

if your black body's vibrato enters a room with no one to echo back its magic

did you make a sound?

no one to share the nostalgia of your past

did it ever really happen?

the only black person in the room

i don't remember the last time my mom said she was happy with a smile
you see i ask her this question on the daily

i ask her this hoping that maybe
she'll respond with joy and save me

but she always has a straight face as she says "baby…
i'm happy"

her voice sounds choked
pressured
pleading
let's not go there

guns of capitalism pointed at her head
as she imagines working the cash register till she's dead

she says she's happy

but momma how great can happiness be if you no longer wish to see the sun?
how great can happiness be if you don't long for the music of simpler times?
curtains drawn you crumble, and i only have old jewelry
and pictures to remember you by

but you're still alive

so, forgive me if i spy a lie when you look me in the eyes, voice broken & dry
to tell me that you're happy

my mother is a dentist
notice how i did not use past tense
my mother
is
a
dentist

who's lost her smile
my mother is a dentist who only lives for her child
my mother is a dentist who works at walmart

because someone thought it would be smart
to protect access to professions based on where you were born
who you are
and who branded you...

bet they thought she'd use voudou on her patients
or better yet
properly and more skillfully treat her patients
well i'll be darned

white god forbid…

so, they send her back to elementary school to count her ones and twos
like she's a kid.

there are many reasons why i find it difficult to befriend white people… and the
white people i have befriended i count dearly on one hand.

i've been told for so long not to be angry that i slowly began choking on smiles
pulled straight out of the code-switching handbook and gifted
to the countless i'm-not-racists in my life.

my anger boiled into hatred. hatred peeled off like a scab to reveal enflamment.
enflamment scarred into wrath. wrath hardened into a wild kind of fury.

so, i guess... i am a docile nigga after all, ain't i? i guess i do know how to follow
instructions because, as you can see, i'm not angry.
i've passed that.

i'll share with you a thought that perpetually travels through my mind…
if the revolution happened the way it did…and we still claimed that
"we have dared to be free. let us thus be ourselves and for ourselves"[5]…
had you somehow been blessed with the ounce of humanity required
to leave us the fuck alone after the fact…

what cities would we have built? what technologies would we have developed…
and owned? if you had never lusted for our diamonds, our mountains, our music…

what Wakanda would we have woven from the fibers of our motherland?

i call this grieving over something stolen.

and you wonder why i don't want to be friends…
why i don't want to hold hands…why i don't want to hang out…
because after clinking champagne with you i go home
to ask my mother if she's happy…
and she lies to me.

this anger is a double-edged sword that could pierce me
as deeply as it could pierce you but, i won't let it go. i want to hold on to it.
squeeze with blood dripping through my fingers.

because after you've stripped me of the mountains and meadows of my mother
all i have is this mad to remind me that they were even mine in the first place.

you left me with nothing but a bouquet of shit to be mad about...

all i want to do is cocoon myself within safer spaces.

wrap myself in the familiarity of people who just…get it. these loving havens adorned with laughter that's "too loud", and a kind of black magic

that brings me to tears…is where i find the respite necessary to see the sorrow in my anger.

it's a healing that's hundreds of years overdue. it's a healing i promise to delve into …

though not at all for your peace of mind…

no…

definitely for my own though…for those who never could…

and for those who only dreamed of the possibility.

my angry poem

love how Ra covers my skin
black magic blue melanin

deep like the stars in the sky
momma sage me to heaven let my energy rise

water the rhythm in our essence
cheers to the sound of our coalescence

ain't i blessed to be the color the sun calls home?
ain't i blessed to be the lover of sun and moon?

blood in the words that i write
black magic red in the fire

roll like the thunder we ride
baby beat me to heaven...
so to battle i rise

wouldn't trade this…for anything
in fact i put this…on everything

how to be tired of cocoa or shea...
if they always,
i mean always

seem to know what to say?

my black is the girl that braids my hair
when sallie mae claims my day
oiled fingers on scalp tracing the pain away

hot sauce on baby cheeks
and smokey embrace

a ritual we keep
between mommas knees i breath
in the stories she weaves
singin' the kind of songs that just come
and don't leave

our laughter is the sweetest song God has ever written
bet she created our joy just to make herself smile

we took your nigga and turned him into a king
put a crown on his head and made him dance
found tempo in the smallest grain of sand

let our hair grow
in the meantime
live
up to the sun

curls like clouds
walk like wild
but like roses have thorns
we remember

i think they truly believed they could crush us
they really thought

like berries
they could squeeze out our juice and sip the drink of Gods

but have you seen us?
the way you stare i'd think you have

seen the way our glare goes on
for days
goes back
in time
to black magic
and blue melanin

our bodies know the secrets of a world your fathers never knew
to remove their shoes for

to feel the swing in her soil

but enough about you…we have the whole world for that

i think… we're truly something special
just what
their dreams were really made of
rest our heads here together you and me babe
there's no one like us around…

black magic, blue melanin

rising...risen

can you hear the drums?

we're too far away in city light traffic
late night magic
too far away in sky-scraping static

to hear the drums…

but the trees can hear them
they dance to their rhythm as the sun sets
the wind as their music
the earth their conductor

and still we fail to hear the sound loud as thunder
of life and her drums
one voice…
begging us to savour the music in stillness

/ /

j'ai semé plus de fausse sécurité aujourd'hui que de roses
que de bonheur

mon jardin est fait de rangées grises
et à perte de vue
il n'y a que des quarts de souffrance

la fin du monde est la vacance la plus longue que j'ai eu de ma vie...

la fin du monde...est la vacance la plus longue que j'ai eu...de ma vie...

la plus reposante
la plus nécessaire

nous ne sommes pas des machines
et pourtant

lorsque nous ouvrons la bouche pour chanter
le son de nos âmes résonne calculé
comme quelque chose d'inhumain
comme quelque chose de froid, sinistre et inespéré

un fruit aux pouvoirs hallucinant est tombé sous tes yeux
au lieu de le partager tu as créé un système de souplesse
pour l'enchaîner à ton égoïsme

et maintenant
ton précieux système s'écroule
glissant entre tes doigts comme du sable chaud
révélant au monde entier
qui est digne d'amour et de miséricorde

et ce n'est ni moi ni mon frère
ni ma sœur ni mon père
et surtout pas ma mère qui se sert encore de ses genoux faibles et ramollis
pour que tu puisses encore manger avec aise
même lorsque la fin assaisonne d'un arrière-goût amère
chaque bouchée cloîtrée

mes larmes baignent ma poitrine chauffée de rage
comme une mère baignerait son enfant avec le dernier seau d'eau propre
qui lui reste

la noirceur a avalé ce monde
mais je ne suis pas d'ici
nous
ne sommes pas de ce monde

nous sommes du monde nouveau qui en découlera
pour faire place aux chansons qui résonnaient en dissonance
avec tes horaires minutieux

pour faire place aux rythmes qui n'allaient pas à la cadence des machines
que nous avons refusé d'avaler

après son festin, le feu qui ravage ce monde laissera derrière
quelques grains de souvenirs

et c'est là
c'est là que nous irons

les serpents nous y mèneront
et nous y planterons les pieds dans un sol mouillé et fertile

nous ne sommes pas de ce monde

say the river never dries but she does

say your lover never lies but she does

say that life is nothing but love & ecstasy & i'd beg to differ

we've forgotten the songs Persephone sang

about how there's beauty in the death of things

the world works in cycles

even the mighty earth we walk on exists in revolution

even the blissful lovers we envy dance until there's nothing left to do but fall

we crawl until we rise

we rise and lose it all

we lose to shed the things that would keep us from seeing a new sun

sun, moon, life, death, life, sun…

i promise you this lesson is a sore one

but it's worth it…

/ /

forests have had a pulse since the beginning of time
we just stopped listening.

there's a way for us to hear it again in the pounding of our marching collective
in the beat of community

in the rhythm of a unity we've been taught to avoid
there's water in the welcoming of your neighbor
say you have sugar for them to laugh in

pull up a chair there's forgiveness and freedom on the menu
and we've got enough here to take us places

when darkness lifts its veil

they'll hear our kikis ringing from all the seven wonders
the sound will make them wonder where they need to go
to fill their bellies with the same kind of daring
to burst and bloom

the water running in the rivers was our blood all along

that's why the elders sigh as they watch us pluck and pick at our own veins
in our own voices there was magic once
built into our backbones there was music

because ain't life nothin but love and love songs
ain't life nothin' but blessings and blues

so, when you cut down your blessings and burn up their roots
you better swallow your surprise
when black skies replace the blue

this … is us.
we're on fire
and drowning
all at once

yet you're asking me to clock in
when the whole world has clocked out
when even the clocks of your systems now tick off beat...

/ /

there's a thing called flow
where you surf on the border between pain and pleasure

when work is a painful pleasure
and purpose
is palpable

a deep well of concentration you won't want to escape
a kind of blue solitude you'll enjoy
an obscure luminescence
an effervescent focus

i want to find the work that flows
the gift that feeds
both the lover and the loved
i'll build my house there
and i'll flourish

/ /

what if God were a struggling artist
who, in a manic frenzy somehow put together the colors, textures, tastes,
smells, sounds and forces that would create the universe?

what if they weren't feeling so hot that day
and creation was the only thing that made sense to them in that moment

what if God was a struggling artist living on their last dime
and created the universe and life as we know it to heal themselves?

if you knew that you were the fruit of a creative labour meant to heal
would you finally strut through Time Square
with those ruby red thigh high boots your mother told you were too flashy?

would you sing that song you've practised in the shower
on karaoke night?

would you tell that person you love them
and believe them when they say they love you back?

if God were a struggling artist
just like you
would you create selfishly?
would you heal?

//

i want our revolution to look like gardens growing in the metro
saxophone spirits singing from Saint-Catherine's streetlights

homeless people tellin' stories in the streets
about how they ain't homeless no more
cuz now they can sleep on hotel satin sheets

embraces will be made mandatory in emergency wards
and rest as the groundwork for all progress
and systemic songs that leave no life lost

want our systems to turn less like clockwork and more like ferris wheels with enough space to carry the children in all of us through highs and lows

there will still be mess
there will still be murder

but the web of our collectives will cradle us in a balance no evil can disturb

and by this... i do mean

no more black baby blood on your pavements

no more queers just for quota

less stealing and more belonging to this land

to this mother that drops fruit with no price tags
for us to eat
because everyone is worthy of her abundance

don't you see?

this whole time we've been falling
when we have everything in us to rise

//

Hard times require furious dancing

- Alice Walker

the sound of a Haitian man singing in English
through the thick colors of his island accent
is the sound of a man who's not afraid to be free

not afraid to cross borders and dimensions
that weren't made for his feet to cross

my mother told me that my father used to love to sing when she first met him
and although i've never heard his music
whenever i see him now
derrière sa guise de grand militaire diplomate

i see a boy with a song

i like to think that i am that song
i'm the song he was never able to sing
because he was afraid

and as i witness the sky falling
and the slow crumble of stainless steel
with my mother's melodies
and my father's fear slipping off my skin
i'm gonna sing…

when the lockdown lifts and i can finally touch you again
i'm gonna sing

when white men wanna pretend that the ways of our old world can still run
i'm gonna sing

when we decide to gather in the streets with the flags of a new world imagined
waving in the wind
with colors their eyes can't yet see
and the white people who actually give a damn forming a barrier to protect us
with their bodies
i'm gonna sing

i'll kiss you and i'll kiss us till my lips are sore
i'm gonna sing

i'm gonna bury my father's fear because this song…
is so sweet
so significant

that it makes me wanna laugh in the face of fear

because i *can* sing
because this voice was *gifted* to me

because silence won't satisfy or protect me anyways
because life herself stopped dancing to show me this truth...

i'm gonna sing

a song to stand the test of time

Notes

1. Adbaraya Toya, or Victoria Montou, was an African woman warrior who was captured as a slave and brought to the region we now know as Haiti.

2. Dahomey was an African kingdom situated in modern-day Benin. The Dahomey kingdom fought vehemently against european colonizers to protect not only their own kingdom, but many other regions of Africa as well. The Dahomey Kingdom was unique for many reasons. Two of it's most notable features were it's all-woman army and the marriages that occurred between women in this society. These characteristics challenge our current understanding of gender roles in North American society (Johnson, 2019; Herskovitz, 1937).

3. As an African warrior captured into slavery, Toya's customs dictated that she commit suicide after being captureds to preserve the integrity of her soul. This may have also been done to protect secrets of the kingdom from enemies. However, upon arriving on the island, as she prepared herself for her death ritual in the forest, she met a fellow slave woman in labour. As a warrior, Toya was also familiar with medicinal healing and birth rituals, so she helped the woman give birth. The child was born successfully, but the woman died in labour, only shortly after asking Toya to promise to care for her child...This is how Toya was forced to stay alive in order to care for the baby boy. She raised him and named him Jean-Jacques. She taught him, along with many other slaves, how to fight in the ways of Dahomey warriors. This young boy grew up to be one of the fathers of the Haitian revolution, known for his ruthlessness and blood-thirsty ways in battle. They called him...Jean-Jacques Dessalines... (Johnson, 2019).

4. Adbaraya Toya was a general in the army of the Dahomey kingdom. What made their army stand out from other African militias was that it was made up entirely of women. This all woman army was called *N'Nonmiton (or Moni)*, meaning "*our mothers*" in the Fon language of Dahomey. Their name symbolized the passion with which these women would fight to uphold the life of their people, even if it brought them death. Europeans refferred to them as the Dahomey Amazons because of the fear they instilled in white men who faced them in battle (Johnson, 2019).

5. This quote is translated from Jean-Jacques Dessalines, in Haiti's decalaration of independence.

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Notes (continued)

"black magic, blue melanin" borrows and adapts lyrics from Tamia's "So Into You"

This chapbook refers to music lyrics from:

Toto Bissainthe (2006). Monologue. *Rétrospectives*
Seinabo Sey (2018). Breathe. *I'm a Dream*

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Is a Montreal based poet, community organizer, performance artist and therapist in training. For updates on new book projects, you can follow Kathleen on Instagram @fanpwezi.

Here you'll find poetry to adorn
Black imaginations
Growing new worlds with their being.
Odes to queer love
And the magic of midnight.
Songs to ancestors I can't name...
Gardens grown in their honour.
You'll find a snapshot
of my becoming
and possibly...
a mirror to your own.

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